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Water board spares companies from cleanup order

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The two main companies accused of contaminating the groundwater beneath Rialto were spared having to pay for expensive replacement water or treatment — for now, the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board decided Friday in Colton.

Fearing a drawn-out court battle that would delay cleanup efforts, the water board voted to rescind an existing cleanup order, which de-

manded replacement water or treatment, and instead told its staff to send letters to at least 40 companies that may also share responsibility for the problem.

The letters will demand that the companies help investigate the sources and extent of the contamination. Failure to cooperate could mean fines of up to \$1,000 per day.

The decision came after a hearing that lasted more than eight hours at Colton City Hall and included extensive testimony from water board

staff, attorneys representing B.F. Goodrich Corp. and Kwikset Corp., as well as experts in hydrology, munitions and corporate law.

Board Chairwoman Carole Beswick of Redlands said board members feared a delay of up to two years if they kept the order in place and the companies continued to fight, first to the state water board and then in the courts.

In addition to speeding up the investigation into who's responsible, the board ordered its staff

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to find a way to encourage the suspected polluters to help find replacement water as soon as possible.

"We want staff to find an answer to the question of the water supply," Beswick said.

At issue is who is responsible for the creeping plume of perchlorate contamination that has shut down 18 wells that had provided up to 34,000 gallons per minute to Rialto, Colton and Fontana.

Perchlorate, a component of rocket fuel and certain explosive devices, affects the thyroid and is believed to be a health threat to infants and pregnant women.

Perchlorate has also caused a major problem in Redlands, the San Gabriel Valley and several other places throughout the state.

Water board officials believe Goodrich contributed to the problem when it manufactured and tested rocket fuel from 1957 through 1964 at a 160-acre site north of Highland Avenue near the Mid-Valley Landfill in Rialto.

Kwikset is believed to be the corporate successor to West Coast Loading Corp., which made parachute and pistol flares at the same location from the early 1950s to 1957.

The water board staff in June ordered Goodrich and Kwikset to either pay for replacement wa-

ter or treatment to clean the water.

Technology to clean perchlorate from water is just now becoming available, and the expected cost is coming down, though it's still expensive.

The West San Bernardino County Water District, which also has affected wells, will soon discuss installing a perchlorate treatment system in the hope that those responsible for the pollution will pay for it later. Goodrich attorneys argued that there is no firm evidence their company ever spilled perchlorate, while Kwikset attorneys said there is no corporate relationship to the long-defunct West Coast Loading.

Officials from local water agencies argued the companies should quit fighting and help pay for a solution, even as other companies are being pursued.

Eric Fraser, Colton's director of water and wastewater, said he was disappointed by the decision.

The city has been paying \$3,000 to \$5,000 a day for water to replace the production from the three wells shut down because of the contamination.

"We'd like them to help put in treatment at the wells," Fraser said. "This doesn't do anything for our people. The longer you wait, the farther... (the contamination) goes."

Craig Moyer, the attorney who made the case for Goodrich, said the company is happy to participate in a full investigation,

including soil sampling, test wells and research of records.

"We think this is the right result," he said.

But the company is unwilling to spend millions to help correct the problems unless there is firm evidence it's responsible, he said.

Water board scientists believe the contamination has moved 6 miles during the past 50 years from the site to Colton.

They point to high levels of perchlorate in wells near the site and diminishing levels farther away.

But some wells in the middle show no contamination, suggesting some of the pollution may be coming from elsewhere, said Frank Rovers, a consultant hired by the companies.

"There's a whole series of wells that are perfectly clear," he said.

And the hydrology of the region makes it unlikely that water moving southeast from Rialto penetrated an earthquake fault that acts as a barrier and polluted wells in Fontana to the southwest, he said.

Kwikset attorneys argued the company is an entirely different company from the one that was formally dissolved in 1958.

Water board officials asked why, if the company is not a corporate relative, it was able to turn over thousands of pages of documents related to the old West Coast Loading Corp.

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